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SUBJECT: TOWARDS A TOBACCO FREE ARMENIA?

This cable is sensitive but unclassified. Please handle accordingly.

¶1. (U) The Coalition for a Tobacco Free Armenia, including American University of Armenia's Public Health Department and 25 NGOs, recently marked the second anniversary of the passage of a law restricting the sale and use of tobacco. At the event, the Coalition introduced public awareness materials including a newly published book on anti-smoking information that NGOs have been providing the Armenian public since 2004. After the presentation, key speakers from the GOAM Health Ministry and different NGOs discussed outstanding difficulties in enforcing the very law they were celebrating, particularly the lack of enforcement mechanisms within the law and the resistance to the law by tobacco producers and importers.

¶2. (U) The GOAM currently funds most of the anti-smoking and tobacco control projects in Armenia, and spends about 100 million AMD (apx. USD 286,000) on these projects each year. This particular campaign, however, was co-sponsored by a USD 10,000 grant from the State Department's ECA Bureau. Within the scope of this grant, the Coalition has conducted workshops and seminars and has printed anti-smoking brochures and booklets to raise public awareness about the dangers of smoking.

¶3. (SBU) COMMENT: Smoking is a pervasive and growing problem in Armenia. Powerful business oligarchs control tobacco production and importation, and the government is reluctant to enforce the somewhat limited restrictions that are already on the books. While it is positive that the Coalition is gaining some popular support, the GOAM will need to make a more substantive and significant commitment for these activities to amount to anything more than a smokescreen.
END COMMENT.

GODFREY